



Catholic Diocese of Richmond
Godparent and Sponsor Attestation Form

Frequently Asked Questions Regarding the Rite of Christian Initiation (RCIA)

In response to our increasingly mobile society and the diverse countries of origin represented within our diocese, a new means for verifying the suitability of godparents and sponsors has been designed in consultation with the judicial vicar. According to this Godparent and Sponsor Attestation Form, the godparent or sponsor certifies, by means of a signature, that he or she meets the requirements set forth in the *Code of Canon Law*¹ as listed on the form.

Use of this form will ensure unity of practice for all parishes and campus ministries within the Diocese of Richmond and will facilitate accurate entries in sacramental registers. No additional information from the godparent or sponsor, or his or her parish or campus ministry, will be necessary.

Use of this form will also provide opportunities to inform and evangelize the catechumen or candidate about the role of godparents and sponsors, including the importance of marriage and a life of faith.

All parishes and campus ministries in the Diocese of Richmond are directed to use the Godparent and Sponsor Attestation Form for all godparent and sponsor verification by **August 15, 2019**.

Should you have questions that go beyond the FAQs listed, please contact the following diocesan employees:

We also find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations.

We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them.

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Pope Francis
Amoris laetitia, no. 37

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Pastors and chaplains with canonical questions should contact the judicial vicar, Msgr. Francis Muench, at 804-355-9155, fmuench@richmonddiocese.org.

Frequently Asked Questions for Rite of Christian Initiation (RCIA): Implementation Concerns

1. Who signs the Godparent and Sponsor Attestation Form?

The godparent or sponsor must sign the Godparent and Sponsor Attestation Form to declare his or her suitability and willingness to accept this role.

2. What is the purpose of the pastor, chaplain, or his delegate's signature?

The catechumen or candidate's pastor or chaplain may request that the prospective godparent or sponsor's signature be witnessed by his or her pastor, chaplain, or a delegate of either (see FAQ #3 for suitable delegates). This action is meant to guarantee that no one except the sponsor is asserting that he or she will be discharging this office, and that he or she understands the Church's requirements. The pastor, chaplain, or delegate is NOT confirming the truth of the person's suitability.

3. Who is a suitable delegate of the pastor or chaplain?

A parochial vicar or deacon is competent to act on behalf of a pastor or chaplain in assisting a prospective godparent or sponsor. So too is a qualified layperson; that is, a member of a parish or campus-ministry staff who has a theological education, who exercises some pastoral responsibility, and whom the pastor or chaplain has designated for this task.

4. If I am witnessing a godparent or sponsor signature, do I need to look up the individual in ParishSoft to confirm his or her status?

No, it is not necessary to verify anything about the individual's Catholic status. When witnessing a signature, you are only ensuring that the person in front of you is in fact the person undertaking the role of godparent or sponsor. You are not attesting to the person's Catholic status.

5. Can you clarify which pastor signs the form and when?

The pastor of the parish where the recipient will be prepared for the sacrament and receive it chooses whether or not to use the pastor signature line. If the pastor opts for the signature line, it is the pastor or delegate of the godparent or sponsor who signs the form. This principle holds true no matter where the godparent or sponsor resides.

6. How do I know whether or not a pastor signature is required? Can I alter the form?

The attestation form is to be distributed within the context of sacramental preparation. Therefore, the person conducting the preparation should be clear about the expectations of the form when presenting it. If a pastor signature is not required, the minister may write “No pastor signature required,” or otherwise cross out the pastor signature line in order to make this clear. The form should not be electronically altered or saved in an alternate form on a parish’s website. The diocesan link should be used to distribute all attestation forms: <https://richmonddiocese.org/office/christian-formation/?tab=16> .

7. If the chosen godparent or sponsor is a member of the same parish as the catechumen or candidate, must he or she still complete the Godparent and Sponsor Attestation Form?

Yes. The Godparent and Sponsor Attestation Form is for anyone presenting himself or herself as godparent or sponsor within the Diocese of Richmond.

8. Can this form be used outside the Diocese of Richmond if a parishioner needs a generic “Catholic letter in good standing”?

If no specific parameters have been given by another diocese, the Godparent/Sponsor Attestation Form may be used for someone requesting a letter in good standing. Some parishes have chosen to write a cover letter explaining the practice of the Diocese of Richmond. However, if another diocese requests specific information, that must be provided. It is for each diocese to determine what is needed for a godparent or sponsor to affirm his or her status in the Catholic Church.

9. Why is there no place for affixing the parish seal on the Godparent and Sponsor Attestation Form?

The parish seal is not used because the Godparent and Sponsor Attestation Form is itself the testimony of the godparent or sponsor that he or she meets the canonical requirements of this role.

The godparent or sponsor’s name is entered into the sacramental register after the sacrament has been administered. No other information is needed about the godparent or sponsor beyond his or her legal name.

10. What is a canonical penalty?

A canonical penalty is a censure or punishment imposed on Catholics for grave offenses: for example, heresy, which is the intentional rejection of certain aspects of Church teaching—that is, dogmas, which must be believed with “divine and Catholic faith”²—or “obstinate persistence in manifest grave sin.”³

In other words, a canonical penalty is applied in response to a person’s intentional actions that go against Church teaching. Examples include throwing away a consecrated host (Eucharistic species) or using a consecrated host for a sacrilegious purpose⁴, or procuring an

abortion⁵. In these and other cases, age and circumstances involving force or fear may excuse the canonical penalty (although the action always remains wrong⁶).

Penalties for these offenses include excommunication from the Church⁷ or the withholding of Holy Communion.⁸ Canonical penalties are meant to be corrective measures for healing the souls of those punished.

11. Is this form used when performing an emergency Baptism? How is an emergency Baptism recorded?

It may not be feasible to provide the attestation form when performing an emergency Baptism. For the purposes of records, the Baptism is to be recorded in the register of the territorial parish where the sacrament was administered. It is the duty of the person who performed the emergency Baptism to inform the pastor of the territorial parish.

12. What form is used if an adult who was baptized Catholic seeks Confirmation?

A Catholic adult preparing for Confirmation should use the Godparent/Sponsor Attestation Form for RCIA. On the form, his or her sponsor would circle Confirmation as the only sacrament being received. Use of this form does not imply that the adult confirmand needs to participate in a full parish RCIA program to receive the sacrament. For assistance with adult Confirmation, please contact the Office of Christian Formation.

13. Is this, or another form, required for Christian witnesses or proxies?

No. The attestation form only applies to godparents or sponsors. Christian witnesses do not need to meet the same requirements as (Catholic) godparents. Christian witnesses need to be 16 years of age and baptized using the trinitarian formula in a non-Catholic tradition. Those who have been baptized Catholic are not permitted to serve as Christian witnesses.

Likewise, proxies also do not need to meet the same requirements as godparents, but must be at least 14 years of age and able to provide testimony about the celebration of the sacrament. Proxies and/or Christian witnesses, in addition to godparents, are recorded in the sacramental records of the parish. (For information on proxies for Confirmation, please see Confirmation FAQ #16.)

Frequently Asked Questions: Pastoral Concerns

14. May a stepparent serve as a godparent or sponsor?

No, a stepparent may not serve as a godparent or sponsor. The *Code of Canon Law* distinguishes between the roles of parent and godparent or sponsor. The role of parent (including stepparent) is to rear the child in the faith. The role of godparent or sponsor is to assist the one baptized in living the Christian life and in staying true to the baptismal promises. The godparent or sponsor also represents the expansion of the spiritual family of the one who is baptized and/or confirmed.

15. What is the difference between a godparent and a sponsor in the RCIA process? Who signs the attestation form?

The godparent is the person chosen by the candidate for full initiation to be present at the Baptism and must meet the criteria established by the church as listed on the Attestation Form. The godparent's role begins with their participation at the Rite of Sending and Rite of Election where they are asked to confirm the readiness of the candidate to move forward. The godparent may, or may not, be the same person that served as a sponsor for the candidate throughout the catechumenate. However, both the godparent and sponsor need to meet this basic Catholic eligibility⁹.

An already baptized candidate will have a sponsor for Confirmation. This sponsor must meet the criteria of the attestation form, as does a sponsor for any baptized-Catholic youth or adult who is receiving Confirmation.

16. How should this form be used in an RCIA preparation program?

Use of the Godparent and Sponsor Attestation Form provides an opportunity to educate the catechumen or candidate about the Church's expectations for godparents and sponsors. The form should be distributed at the onset of the program so that the catechumen or candidate make an informed choice regarding his or her godparent and/or sponsor.

Likewise, use of the form can provide a way to help would-be godparents or sponsors who do not meet the qualifications for the role they seek. In the context of pastoral care, the parish or campus ministry can support and guide such persons, perhaps even facilitating their restoration to communion with the Church.

17. What if the pastor, chaplain, or delegate knows that some part of the claim on the Attestation Form is NOT true?

As long as the knowledge is not under the seal of confession, the pastor, chaplain, or delegate should take this as an opportunity to catechize the prospective godparent or sponsor.

When someone appears to be unqualified to serve as a godparent or sponsor, the minister should first explain to him or her the purpose and requirements of this role. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains that godparents "must be firm believers, able and ready to help the newly baptized child...on the road of Christian life."¹⁰ The Church seeks a practicing Catholic because a godparent or sponsor is responsible for helping the catechumen or candidate respond to God's grace.¹¹ The prospective godparent or sponsor may not have considered this point, focusing instead on kinship or friendship as the chief qualification for the role.

The pastor or delegate should also explain that, regarding the active faith of a godparent or sponsor, the Church does not seek moral perfection but rather a sincere effort. This effort must be publicly verifiable (for example, regular Mass attendance and a valid marriage) because the role of a godparent or sponsor is public. Being a godparent or sponsor is not a private arrangement since this person also represents the Church. If the prospective

godparent or sponsor were to openly contradict the faith he or she professed, this would weaken the faith of the Christian community. This is what the Church means by scandal: a poor example that leads others into sin.¹²

18. Cohabitation is not listed on the Attestation Form. How is cohabitation, or any other sin, to be addressed with prospective godparents or sponsors?

The Godparent/Sponsor Attestation Form is consistent in asking what the Church asks of a godparent or sponsor. While there are sins that may prevent someone from being a good witness to the faith, it is for the prospective godparent or sponsor to determine whether he or she fulfills the criteria of a Catholic in good standing. The Church seeks sincere effort rather than moral perfection with respect to godparents or sponsors. There is a difference between not leading a life consonant with the teaching of the Church and human imperfection.

19. What pastoral means are available to restore a person to the status befitting the role of a godparent or sponsor?

The pastor, chaplain, or delegate should bear in mind that when it comes to serving as a godparent or sponsor, not all cases are the same. Some problematic situations can be remedied more easily than others.

A. Age

A person must typically be at least sixteen years old to serve as a godparent or sponsor.¹³ The Church recognizes that a person at this age can have the necessary spiritual maturity to help a person being baptized or confirmed.¹⁴ Nevertheless, canon law allows a pastor or the minister of Baptism or Confirmation to grant “an exception for a just cause.”¹⁵ Examples of just cause include the proximity of a person’s birthday and evidence of maturity despite a younger age.

B. Mass attendance

Failing to regularly attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation is a common obstacle to serving as a godparent or sponsor. The minister should first ascertain why the person does not regularly attend Mass, and then help him or her to do so. Notably, if a person cannot attend Mass because of necessary work, or some other grave obligation (for example, caring for a loved one), then he or she is excused. In such cases, the person should still make an effort to pray and read the biblical readings for Mass.¹⁶

In other cases, a person may not be aware that attending a Mass on Saturday evening (that is, an anticipated or vigil Mass) fulfills the Sunday obligation.¹⁷ Likewise, the person may not realize that he or she could attend a Mass in another parish at a different time, or even in a different language (for example, Spanish), to fulfill the obligation.

More commonly, the prospective godparent or sponsor has options for attending Mass but for whatever reason does not do so. In this case, the minister should explain the importance and meaning of Mass—it is a participation in the saving Death and Resurrection of Christ¹⁸—and encourage the person to attend. Next, the pastor or delegate should ask the person if he or

she is willing to try to fulfill this obligation in the future. If the person expresses a willingness to do so, this commitment is sufficient for him or her to serve as a godparent or sponsor. The minister should also encourage to the person to receive the Sacrament of Penance, emphasizing the spiritual benefits of Reconciliation.¹⁹

C. Missing sacraments

If the prospective godparent or sponsor lacks a Sacrament of Christian Initiation—Baptism, First Holy Communion, or more commonly, Confirmation—the minister should explain to him or her the importance of these sacraments: that they initiate a person into the Church by means of participation in Christ’s Paschal Mystery.²⁰ The pastor or delegate should also assure the person that he or she could receive these sacraments given the proper disposition and necessary preparation.²¹ In the case of a missing sacrament, it is best to explain that the person should not serve as a godparent or sponsor until his or her Christian initiation has been completed.²² The reason is that the prospective godparent or sponsor must himself or herself be fully rooted in the Church in order to help someone else undergo initiation.

D. Irregular marriages

An irregular marriage—one the Church does not recognize as valid—constitutes another obstacle to serving as a godparent or sponsor.²³ Because an irregular marriage cannot always be rectified quickly or easily, a person in this situation should be counseled not to serve as a godparent or sponsor until the matter has been resolved.²⁴ Since any marriage is a deeply personal matter, the minister must tread carefully in these circumstances.²⁵

The pastor or delegate should understand that it is no longer common knowledge that, for a Catholic to be validly married, he or she must contract marriage in the presence of a priest or deacon (unless a dispensation from canonical form has been obtained, or unless the spouses were not Catholic at the time of the wedding and subsequently entered the Catholic Church).²⁶ This means that a prospective godparent or sponsor may be surprised to learn that he or she does not meet the qualifications for the role being sought.

If a person was married in the Church, then obtained a divorce, but has not since remarried, he or she would still be eligible to serve as a godparent or sponsor (assuming the other requirements have been met). Here it should be remembered that the Church permits spouses to separate for a grave reason.²⁷ Contrary to misconception, it is not a civil divorce that renders a person ineligible to serve as a godparent or sponsor; rather, it is either a second marriage, without an annulment and involving spousal intimacy, or cohabitation that includes sexual relations.

The minister should carefully and lovingly explain that someone in an irregular marriage is not excommunicated from the Church, as is often believed; on the contrary, the person very much belongs to the Christian community.²⁸ Although the person is not normally permitted to receive the Sacrament of Penance or Holy Communion²⁹, he or she may and should still attend Mass, as the obligation to do so remains.³⁰ The person should also be invited to participate in the parish’s other activities.³¹ The grace of God continues to work in the life of a

person who is in an irregular marriage, helping him or her to do good, to love his or her companion, and to serve the local community.³² The pastor or delegate should also strive to affirm the value of a person's current marriage³³—unless the person has indicated otherwise—and encourage him or her to be married in the Church, as this form of marriage will bolster the couple's commitment to each another and permit the reception of the sacraments.³⁴

Sometimes a person in an irregular marriage indicates that he or she lacks a sacrament of Christian Initiation, typically Confirmation. (This is because the age for Confirmation varies from place to place, and the person may have lapsed from the practice of the faith during adolescence.) Often enough, a question arises on the spot: Should the person in an irregular marriage first be confirmed, which the Church recommends prior to marriage³⁵, before being married in the Church? Since the reception of Confirmation, like other sacraments, requires a proper disposition³⁶, the marriage situation must be resolved first. Then the person is permitted to receive Confirmation.

The same principle applies to a baptized Catholic who has not received First Holy Communion. (An unbaptized adult who has frequented the Catholic Church or a Catholic who was baptized as an infant but has remained uncatechized, should undergo the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults [RCIA]). A Catholic in an irregular marriage may receive the Sacrament of Penance and Holy Communion if (1) he or she has committed to living "as brother and sister" (that is, in continence) with his or her spouse; and (2) if the couple's marriage status is unknown, such that the reception of Holy Communion would not cause scandal to the community.

In the case of an irregular marriage, the minister must assess why the marriage is invalid and then briefly explain to the prospective godparent or sponsor what steps would be necessary for him or her to be married in the Church. Rather than entering into a long conversation at this point, when the person may feel overwhelmed in trying to understand the Church's teaching on marriage and may be disappointed at not meeting the qualifications for being a godparent or sponsor, the minister should encourage the person to make an appointment for a subsequent meeting. Practically speaking, the minister should seek to facilitate such a meeting by exchanging contact information with the person.

It may be that a person's marriage simply lacks canonical form (that is, marriage in the presence of a priest or deacon). In this case, at a subsequent meeting, a priest or deacon could assist the person in obtaining an (administrative) annulment and then begin the process for preparing him or her to have the marriage convalidated. If, by contrast, one of the parties to the marriage was married previously, a dissolution or (formal-case) annulment may be necessary. In cases of doubt, the pastor, chaplain, or delegate should contact the Diocesan Tribunal.

20. Are there any other pastoral measures encouraged to restore the member fully to the Christian community?

If someone is eligible to be a godparent or sponsor because his or situation can be remedied with relative ease, the minister should encourage the person to receive the Sacrament of Penance (also known as Confession or Reconciliation) in preparation for the sacred role, briefly mentioning its spiritual benefits.³⁷

¹ See *Code of Canon Law*, canons 874 §1 and 893 §1.

² See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 751.

³ See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 915.

⁴ *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1367.

⁵ *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1398.

⁶ *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1323.

⁷ See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1331.

⁸ See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 915.

⁹ See *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, nos.10-11.

¹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1780, 1783-1785; Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family, *Amoris laetitia* (2016), no. 37

¹¹ See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 872, 892; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1255, 1311; *Rite of Baptism for Children*, no. 8; *Order for Celebrating Confirmation*, no. 5; *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*; *Christian Initiation: General Instruction*, nos. 8-10; Introduction, no. 11.

¹² See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2284-2285.

¹³ See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 874 §1, 2°.

¹⁴ See *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, no. 10, 2°.

¹⁵ See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 874 §1,2°.

¹⁶ See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1248 §2.

¹⁷ See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1248 §1.

¹⁸ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1364-1368.

¹⁹ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1468-1470; *Rite of Penance*, no. 7.

²⁰ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1212.

²¹ See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 843.

²² See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 874 §1,3°.

²³ See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 874 §1, 3°.

²⁴ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1650.

²⁵ See Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, no.296.

²⁶ See *Code of Canon Law*, canons 1059, 1108 §1, 1117, 1127, §2.

²⁷ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1649; *Code of Canon Law*, canons 1151-1153.

²⁸ See Pope St. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris consortio* (1981), no. 84; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1651; Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, nos. 243, 299, 306, 312.

²⁹ See *Code of Canon Law*, canons 916, 987; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1650.

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³⁰ See *Code of Canon Law*, Canon 1247.

³¹ See Pope St. John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 84; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1651; Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, no. 299.

³² See Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, no. 291.

³³ See Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, no. 292-294.

³⁴ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1631.

³⁵ See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1065 §1.

³⁶ See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 889 §2.

³⁷ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1468-1470; *Rite of Penance*, no. 7.